

PROGRAM ON ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT

Towards an Alternative Regional Agrifood Trade Agenda in the Era of the Polycrisis

An Invitation to Civil Society Organizations in Southeast Asia

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Introduction

“Resist Business-As-Usual: Disrupt, Reclaim, Rebuild” was the theme of this year’s ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN Peoples’ Forum (ACSC/APF), the primary regional network of civil society and grassroots organizations (CSOs) engaging the ASEAN process since 2005. Affirmed during the Regional Consultative Meeting (RCM) on May 13-14, 2026, the theme highlights Southeast Asian (SEA) CSOs’ acute awareness of the polycrisis—the worsening food insecurity and poverty, climate change, intensifying geopolitical tensions, and shrinking civic spaces, among others—that poses an existential threat to humanity (ACSC/APF 2026).

At the same time, the theme reflects civil society’s frustration with ASEAN. While the official ASEAN Vision 2045 aspires to create a “resilient, innovative, dynamic, and people-centered” region, the ACSC/APF (2026) noted that the bloc remains committed to a neoliberal, state-centered political-economic framework that fosters an environment in which corporate interests and a “might is right” ethic prevail. More importantly, the theme captures CSOs’ commitment to forging an alternative regionalism framework—one that responds decisively to the polycrisis, is grounded in the lived experiences of Southeast Asian peoples, and treats human welfare and environmental sustainability as primary metrics of development.

This policy brief seeks to contribute to the collective effort to forge an alternative framework for regionalism. Specifically, it aims to direct attention to agrifood trade, positioning it as a vital pillar for cross-border cooperation. Agrifood trade is not just integral to meeting people’s dietary needs, generating income for farmers, and providing livelihoods, but also to state formation and the global geopolitical ordering process (McMichael 2013). Social movements that hope to advance alternative models of development and cross-border cooperation must therefore offer an alternative framework for governing agrifood trade relations.

To initiate this conversation, the brief provides an overview of the existing ASEAN agrifood trade landscape and identifies key considerations for forging an alternative regional agrifood trade agenda. These considerations are also informed by insights from the proceedings of the five Conferences on Alternatives in Southeast Asia organized by the Program on Alternative Development (AltDev) of the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) from 2018 to 2024.

Overview of the ASEAN regional agrifood trade landscape

The ASEAN regional agrifood trade regime operates through a tiered and liberalized market framework that consolidates the region into a single market and production base. Internally, trade relations among ASEAN Member States (AMS) are governed by the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA), the ASEAN Comprehensive Investment Agreement (ACIA), and the ASEAN Trade in Services Agreement (ATISA). These three agreements ensure that goods, investments, labor, and services originating from any AMS can freely flow throughout the region by eliminating import duties and quantitative restrictions, enforcing non-discrimination of intra-ASEAN capital, and prohibiting performance requirements, as provided in the World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreement on Trade-Related Investment Measures (ASEAN 2009a; ASEAN 2009b; ASEAN 2020b). Externally, ASEAN's trade is governed by Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with dialogue partners under a framework known as "ASEAN+1." These dialogue partners include Australia and New Zealand (AANZFTA), China (ACFTA), Japan (AJCEP), India (AIFTA), and South Korea (AKFTA). Building upon the successes of the "+1" FTAs, leaders of AMS and the aforementioned dialogue partners established the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) to deepen economic cooperation, boost economic growth, and promote equitable development in the region (ASEAN 2020a).

The ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on the Vision for Food, Agriculture, and Forestry (FAF) Towards 2045 embodies this liberalized market orientation. The declaration envisions a regional FAF sector that is "sustainable, inclusive, resilient, and secure" and strengthens ASEAN's role as a key global trading partner (ASEAN 2025b, 2). To realize this vision, the AMS committed to 1) promote sustainable agriculture, 2) reduce carbon emissions from agriculture and forestry, 3) leverage digital technology, 4) facilitate climate change adaptation and resilience, and 5) promote responsible and sustainable investment in the FAF sector. All of these commitments will be pursued within the framework of "strategic market integration free of unnecessary trade barrier" (ASEAN 2025b, 2). This means creating "a conducive investment climate for both domestic and foreign investors through policy reforms, regulatory support, and financial incentives" (ASEAN 2025b, 5). Specific to the commitment to sustainability, the

Declaration notes that "economic sustainability is a prerequisite for achieving environmental sustainability" (ASEAN 2025b, 3). The Declaration frames secured market access as a necessary condition for realizing the sustainability agenda. It assumes that agrifood producers must be financially stable before they can afford to go green, and that they will shift to ecologically sustainable practices only if they are guaranteed a stable, profitable market for their produce. This approach, in effect, reduces sustainability to a function of capital investment and therefore reveals a greater commitment to sustaining economic growth than to addressing ecological concerns (Escobar 1995).

ASEAN is indeed gearing up to achieve its goal of becoming the "fourth largest global economy by 2045" (ASEAN 2025c, 57). According to *ASEAN Key Figures 2025* (ASEAN 2025a), the regional bloc has maintained its position as the world's fifth-largest economy, contributing roughly 3.5 percent to global output. Its combined regional GDP in 2024 is USD 3.9 trillion, up from USD 3.8 trillion in 2023, with a growth rate increasing steadily from 4.0 percent in 2023 to 4.8 percent in 2024. For comparison, the top global economies experienced mixed growth trajectories from 2023 to 2024. The US economy expanded by 2.8 percent (a slight decrease from 2.9 percent in 2023), while China posted 5.0 percent growth (down from 5.2 percent). Germany's GDP contracted by 0.2 percent (a modest improvement from 0.3 percent), and Japan grew by just 0.1 percent (down from 0.7 percent). Meanwhile, India recorded a growth rate of 6.5 percent in 2024, down from 7.6 percent the previous year. The same report notes that the primary driver of ASEAN's growth is the tertiary (services) sector, which accounted for 54.7 percent of the economy's share in 2024, up from 52.6 percent in 2015. The secondary (manufacturing) sector remained stable at 30.2 percent, while the primary sector declined to 15.1 percent. This underscores the ASEAN economy's shift toward services.

Regarding trade in goods, the report noted that ASEAN's total global trade increased by 8.8 percent, from USD 3.5 trillion in 2023 to USD 3.8 trillion in 2024. This comprised exports valued at USD 1.95 trillion and imports of USD 1.89 trillion, resulting in a trade surplus—a performance the region has maintained since 2005. Intra-ASEAN exports accounted for 22.5 percent of total ASEAN exports, followed by exports to the United States at 16 percent (up from 14.3 percent in 2005) and to China at 14.9 percent (up from 8.1 percent in 2005). In terms of imports, China has become ASEAN's largest source

of goods, with its share surging from 10.6 percent in 2005 to 25.5 percent in 2024. Consequently, the share of intra-ASEAN imports declined from 24.5 percent to 20.3 percent during the same period. These trends highlight the region's growing dependence on China.

Considerations in forging alternative regional agrifood trade

How should Southeast Asian CSOs respond to ASEAN's ambition of becoming the world's fourth-largest economy by 2045? Is it strategic to align with this vision and focus the advocacy on ensuring that such economic achievement is felt by Southeast Asian peoples and remains environmentally sustainable? Or is it necessary to reject this goal entirely, on the grounds that economic performance, as measured by GDP growth, is predicated on the commodification of life and nature for profit and is therefore inherently incompatible with an aspiration for a society that prioritizes human welfare and ecological sustainability? If so, what alternative economic vision can be advanced for the region, and what would agrifood trade look like within it?

One potential pathway is what Bello calls "deglobalization," or reorienting the economy toward fulfilling domestic needs and "re-embedding" market relations within society so community, solidarity, and equality take primacy over market efficiency (AltDev 2024, 57). While this delinking trajectory is conceptually compelling for progressive social movements, the experiences of many countries that have dared to do so demonstrate that breaking away from the established global economic order often carries severe consequences, including economic embargoes and military interventions (Mongaya 2025). Can the people of Southeast Asia bear the brunt of deglobalization's implications? What strategies must be adopted to navigate these ramifications effectively? Several structural questions also require consideration. For example, is it realistic to reorient agrifood trade primarily toward meeting domestic needs? Does the region possess sufficient local resources and industrial capacity to meet not only the dietary needs of its population, but also the requirements of its industries? Furthermore, what will happen to the communities and workers whose livelihoods depend entirely on cash-crop export markets? Bello also cautioned that far-right movements have increasingly appropriated the discourse of deglobalization, such as in France, where Marine Le Pen has used it to

advance anti-European Union and anti-immigrant agendas. For social movements deeply committed to human rights, a critical question emerges—How can we ensure that campaigns for resource sovereignty are not instrumentalized by authoritarian-leaning parties in the region?

There is also the sensitive topic of engaging the market. Currently, alternative trade is largely understood to be the domain of social solidarity economy (SSE) enterprises, including cooperatives, fair-trade groups, and alternative trade organizations. While these entities operate within the market and generate revenue like conventional businesses, they are structurally distinct. A primary point of divergence is ownership, as SSE enterprises are owned and managed by the community (AltDev 2021). As such, they play a foundational role in reasserting social ownership and democratic governance over wider economic activities. The second point of divergence is how these enterprises utilize their profits. Rather than amassing these gains to increase shareholders' wealth or reinvesting solely to accumulate more capital, social enterprises use their profits to advance their social mission (AltDev 2024). Given these defining characteristics, a critical question arises—can alternative trade enterprises survive in a highly competitive business landscape while remaining committed to a community governance framework and a profit-to-social-mission wealth distribution model? Can these enterprises scale up without adopting the logic of capital accumulation and elite governance structure? If expanding operations requires building financial reserves, can they realistically do so without compressing worker wages, squeezing small producers, or compromising their ecological standards? This concern about scaling up is among the most common struggles for CSOs. Many alternative practices remain narrow in scope because they usually focus on isolated sections of society (AltDev 2023; AltDev 2020). Is this local focus and inability to scale up merely an operational shortcoming, or a limitation inherent to a model that prioritizes social missions over relentless capital accumulation?

Charging a premium allows social enterprises to generate income while guaranteeing fair compensation for producers and workers. However, this strategy requires finding a market willing and able to pay higher prices, rendering the products of social enterprises unaffordable to the majority of working people. When alternative products are accessible only to affluent consumers, does this not fundamentally defeat the principle of people-to-people solidarity? To ensure product affordability, some CSOs, guided by the solidarity economy framework, work to

reduce middlemen's role in the marketing process by establishing direct producer-consumer linkages (AltDev 2023; AltDev 2020) or by trading among themselves (AltDev 2026). However, how effective can these direct linkages be when bridging vast geographical divides? This question is especially critical today, as most of the population is increasingly concentrated in urban centers and, therefore, far removed from food-producing rural communities. Moreover, can direct producer-consumer linkages meet the requirements of institutional markets such as schools and hospitals, or are they destined to remain niche networks operating in weekend markets and boutique stalls?

Conclusion

Many more concerns and questions remain to be unpacked. For now, the hope is that the questions raised above will serve as a catalyst to (re)start this important conversation. By outlining Southeast Asia's current agrifood trade landscape, economic trajectory, and official frameworks, this policy brief aims to provide the crucial context needed to build an alternative. The considerations raised here, informed by the conferences AltDev has organized over the last five years, underscore how complex it is to forge an alternative regionalism. It shows that the work does not stop at having an overarching framework like people-to-people solidarity. The real work begins when we try to operationalize those ideas inside a complex and often hostile environment. This brief serves as an invitation to launch a broader conversation about the critical role of agrifood trade in forging alternative regionalism, and to design concrete solutions that align with the aspirations of Southeast Asian peoples and address their complex needs in this era of polycrisis.

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